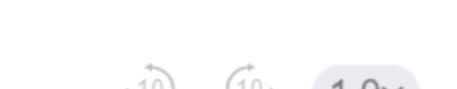


CRIME

# ‘Fear and paranoia.’ Grandson says Andrew Lester bought into conspiracies, disinformation

BY JUDY L. THOMAS AND LUKE NOZICKA

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## Ralph Yarl shooting

After a Kansas City teenager was shot and injured for going to the door of the wrong house, outrage followed in Kansas City and across the country.

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A grandson of the man [charged with shooting a Black teen](#) in Kansas City's Northland last week said he was “appalled” and “disgusted” at his grandfather's actions and is thankful Ralph Yarl is recovering.

“I was horrified. I thought it was terrible,” Klint Ludwig said of his immediate reaction to hearing about the shooting of the 16-year-old. “It was inexcusable. It was wrong.

“I stand with Ralph, and really want his family to achieve justice for what happened to them. Their child or grandchild or nephew's life was fundamentally changed forever, over a mistake and someone being scared and fearful.”

Andrew D. Lester, 84, [shot Yarl twice](#) — including once in the head — when Yarl accidentally went to the wrong house on Thursday night while trying to pick up his younger brothers. Lester, a white man who police say shot Yarl after the teen rang Lester's doorbell, was charged Monday with [first-degree assault](#) and armed criminal action. He surrendered to authorities on Tuesday, [was released on \\$200,000 bond](#) and [pleaded not guilty Wednesday](#) during his first court appearance.

The shooting [sparked a national conversation](#) on race and guns.

“I feel terribly for him,” Ludwig, 28, said of Yarl. “And I'm really glad that he's doing OK, he's going to live. I know his life is changed forever. And I'm really sorry.”

Ludwig, who lives in the Kansas City area, told The Star on Wednesday that he also was disgusted at the way authorities handled the case.

He was critical of the way both police and the Clay County prosecutor conducted the initial investigation, releasing Lester and not charging him after he was first brought in.

“The only reason why he is now receiving charges and an investigation is being held was because of community outreach to bring attention to this,” Ludwig said. “The response has been great. It's been amazing to see this solidarity and coming together as a community.”

Two other relatives who spoke with The Star said they didn't believe Lester was a racist and thought he likely was scared when he shot Yarl.

Ludwig said he and his grandfather, who goes by the first name Dan, used to be very close.

“But in the last five or six years or so, I feel like we've lost touch,” he said. “I've gotten older and gained my own political views, and he's become staunchly right-wing, further down the right-wing rabbit hole as far as doing the election-denying conspiracy stuff and COVID conspiracies and disinformation, fully buying into the Fox News, OAN kind of line. I feel like it's really further radicalized him in a lot of ways.”

Ludwig said his grandfather had been immersed in “a 24-hour news cycle of fear and paranoia.”

“And then the NRA pushing the ‘stand your ground’ stuff and that you have to defend your home,” he said. “When I heard what happened, I was appalled and shocked that it transpired, but I didn't disbelieve that it was true. The second I heard it, I was like, ‘Yeah, I could see him doing that.’”

Does he consider his grandfather a racist?

“I believe that there have been some positions that he's held that have been bigoted or sort of disparaging,” Ludwig said. “But it's stock Fox News, conservative American stuff. It's ‘anybody who gets an abortion is a murderer.’ And ‘fatherless Black families are the reason why crime exists in this country.’ It's stuff everybody's heard at the Thanksgiving table every year.”

Ludwig said his grandfather's paranoia had accelerated in the past couple of years.

“I hesitate to say he got more extreme, because all this stuff has been extreme,” he said, “and it's been the same story for decades and decades, and generation to generation of people believing the same things. It's just nowadays people are acting on it a little bit more.”

Lester, a military veteran and former airline mechanic, was an avid hunter and longtime gun owner, Ludwig said.

“Back in his younger days, he would be involved in shooting sports,” he said. “And I don't necessarily have a problem with using guns and having guns. It's the paranoia that I think is a real issue.”

When he was growing up, Ludwig said, Lester would come to his school for grandparent lunches, and Ludwig would spend time in the summer at his grandparents' house, riding bikes — and getting lost in the neighborhood.

“It truly is easy to get lost in those neighborhoods,” he said. “The streets look the same.

“Ralph Yarl did nothing wrong by showing up at the wrong house, which is an honest, easy mistake. And the fact that it was almost a death sentence is disgusting.”

Another grandson of Lester's said he thinks characterizing the shooting as a hate crime is inaccurate.

Daniel Ludwig, 30, of Kansas City — who is Klint's older brother — said he did not believe race played a role in the shooting.

“It's just sad and I wish it didn't happen,” Daniel Ludwig told The Star. “It seems like a bunch of mistakes in a row that resulted in a tragedy. I mean, a lot of mistakes all the way around, unfortunately.”

Daniel Ludwig said he believed his grandfather would not have fired had Yarl not “gone for the door.” It was clear, he said, that the shooting did not unfold “for no reason.”

“If you look at the affidavit, there were actions taken that caused it,” he said, later adding: “My grandpa's side isn't being reported.”

Yarl, however, told police he was “immediately” shot after simply ringing the doorbell.

Lee Merritt, a civil rights attorney representing the Yarl family, said Yarl “never” put his hand on Lester's door and did not try to enter the home.

“Mind you, touching the door in and of itself wouldn't be enough to justify the use of deadly force,” he said Wednesday. “Ralph rang the doorbell and waited quietly outside until the door was open.”

Earlier this week, Clay County Prosecuting Attorney Zachary Thompson said there was a “racial component” to the shooting, though he did not elaborate. Civil rights and faith leaders have called for Lester to additionally face federal hate crime charges.

A nephew of Lester's told The Star Wednesday evening that his uncle was a “decent man.”

“I really didn't know what to think when I heard about this,” said Dean Smith, of Jewell Ridge, Virginia. “It just kind of shocked me. You don't expect something like that.”

Smith said Lester was home alone because his wife had been in a rehab facility.

“They were trying to get her health back before she came home,” he said.

He said he believed Lester was scared when he heard the doorbell ring late at night.

“Eighty-four years old, living by himself.”

Smith said it would “be hard for me to believe” that Lester is racist.

“He's worked with so many people,” he said. “He's been a supervisor and all, over different races. He's just a really straightforward, everyday person. He was just retired military, trying to get on with life.”

*The Star's Glenn E. Rice contributed to this report.*

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